

## [I'll Take the Good Clean Dirt]

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I'LL TAKE THE GOOD CLEAN DIRT

"Granite's all right for them that likes it," he drawled slowly. "And cuttin' stone is all right if a man wants to make his livin' that way. I ain't got any quarrel with how a man works to make his livin', no more'n I have with his religion. I figger to tend my own business and let the other feller do the same. That way folks get along. Meddlin' is what makes all the trouble. And it's too bad but we got more'n our share of meddlers in this world. This Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin — they're nothin' but meddlers on a big scale. Instead of schemin' to get a man's farm away from him they work it to get whole countries away from people.

He was a man past middle-age, but still straight and strong, with a clear red face and sandy gray hair. His eyes were very blue and calm, crinkled at the corners from looking into sun and wind. He wore a faded brown coat over his overalls and a battered felt hat pushed back from a mild brow. On the rail fence his big hands were knotted and [sinewy?] and the wrists were ridged with muscle. He spat tobacco juice expertly and wiped his yellow moustache with a deliberate hand.

"It ain't all granite up here on the Hill," he said. "There's farmin' too and some pretty good farms. Not big rich farms but fair-to-middlin'. And there's deserted farms too where the people gave up and left 'em. Maybe it was poor soil 2 Or mortgages or bad luck with crops and cattle. And maybe it was somethin' in the people themselves. It ain't easy makin' a

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livin' on these farms — but it can be done.” He looked back over his land, gravely and thoughtfully. “Yes, it can be done.”

His farmstead sat on a little rise above the road. The buildings were weathered to a soft silver-gray, but they stood sturdy and secure against the brown autumn background, beaten by storm and sun, yet tough and resilient as the man himself. Showers of scarlet and gold maple leaves fell along the slope in bright flurries. Tan and white cattle grazed among the gray boulders of a far pasture. A scene in sharp contrast to the great pyramids of waste granite and the deep vast quarries on the other side of the Hill.

“Well, by God,” the farmer said. “They can have their granite. I'll take the good clean dirt for me.

“I've known a lot of granite workers of course. I used to know all the old-timers and they was good men. I don't know so many now but the ones I knew I liked. Maybe they lived faster'n a farmer does. They have to, by God, because they don't last so long. I never blamed 'em for carryin' on the way they did. They was good-hearted fellers, good fellers to talk to. They might raise hell but it wasn't out of meanness. The work they do, the life they lead a man' got to have some way to let go and get away from it. On the other hand some of them fellers was sober and quit as any old farmer.” The clear blues twinkled whimsically. “And some of us farmers 3 ain't always been angels.

“My life has been spent right here on this farm, put right into these fields. I used to get envious hearin' some of them quarriers talkin' about the places they'd been; the things they'd done and seen. I was young then. Now I figger it don't make much difference. Most of them fellers are dead and gone. They had a lot I didn't have — and I got a lot they never had, too.

“My folks come from the Maine coast, Searsport. I don't know why they come here. My father wasn't much of a hand to talk, and my mother was always too busy raisin' us young ones. Some of my father's folks was sea-farin' men and some was farmers like him. Some

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of 'em went West in the Forties. I got cousins out in California now. Never saw 'em, prob'ly never will. They was Scandinavians.

My father built this house and barn, broke this land. He raised a big family to help him farm it. I was the only one stayed home after we got growed-up. I guess I was the only one that took to farmin'. Maybe the rest had some of that sea-farin' blood in 'em. One of my brothers went to cuttin' stone down in a shed in the City, and he died young. One of the younger ones was killed over 'cross in the war. And I stayed on right here where I was born — where I'll die.

"I got a good wife — she ain't well now, has a woman to help her — but she's a good woman. Before she was taken she'd do a man's work any day. We had two children, a boy and a girl. Would've had more if she hadn't been taken sick. This woman 4 who helps my wife, she's got a good boy and he works for me. He's a good worker and he likes farmin'. Been here since he was a little kid, seems almost like my own boy. My son, he's workin' out in Dayton, Ohio, married, family of his own. And the girl's married too, livin' down in Baltimore. Married good too. She was a trained nurse, married a doctor. Sometimes they come home in the summer but we don't see 'em much then. Always off playin' golf, some such thing. No more interest in the farm than nothin' at all. Can't even stand the barnyard smell they grew up in. It ain't a bad smell either. I keep my place clean.

"Me — I like the farm and I like farmin'. I like to be round the animals and see things growin'."

He gazed over his rolling fields to the haze of color on the ridge. "Sugar maples up there. Lost some of 'em in that hurricane last fall. Took down a lot of timber on me, too. Guess we was lucky at that when you see what it done down-country way. I got a nice dairy herd — thirty-two head. Give as good milk as you can get on the hill. Crops come pretty good this year, but the season's short. Late spring and early frosts.

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"We don't go down to the City much any more. Used to go when we was younger and the kids was home. Now maybe we go down Saturday nights. But I don't like it. Too much traffic and noise, too many people, all strangers seems like; all hurryin' and rushin' and crowdin' like sheep. The lights hurt my eyes and the noise hurts my ears. It makes me feel old and tired-out. My wife used to like to go down to the picture shows or 5 go shoppin', but I guess she feels like I do lately. She ain't well at all anyway. No, I feel like a stranger down in the City. Maybe it ain't big but it seems big. I'd rather set home and listen to the radio. Or I'd rather go right down here to the store and sat round talkin' with men I know. There's a friendly kind of feelin' you don't get down in the City. Up here people got time enough to set easy and talk and smoke and enjoy things. Down in the City they ain't. Seems crazy to me the way they rush round. And then all these murders and crimes and scandals, all the war talk. Makes you wonder what things are coming to, by God it does.

"They say granite made this place what it is and prob'ly it did. But where'd they be without the farmers? Where'd any place be without farmers? People can get along without tombstones, but they can't get along without food, they can't get along without potatoes, eggs, milk, butter, bread, vegetables. You can't eat granite.

"Sure, some of the monuments them fellers cut are beautiful. But I can't see nothin' beautiful about a graveyard, by God I can't. It's nice to respect and remember the dead, but sometimes it seems like an awful waste of money." He shook his shaggy gray head and spat a brown stream. "They say folks, tourists, come from miles around to see them cemeteries. And probably never look at them mountains over there at all!

"Well, different people are bound to see things different. I like to work in the dirt. Somebody else likes to cut stone or set in an office or work in a store. Now you just look up 6 there on the verandy —" He pointed to the great pile of vegetables, heaped golden and orange and green on the wooden porch. "To me that's what's beautiful. It ain't cold like

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stone. It's warm and fresh and ripe. Ain't it pretty? It's what I raised myself," he said with quiet satisfaction and pride. "And it's what I like to look at."